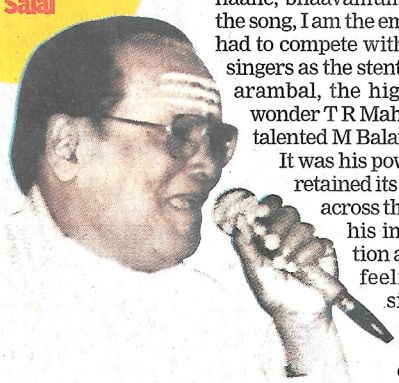
Credited With 4,000 Songs Over A 40-Year Career, T M Soundararajan Had To Surmount Many Barriers To Become The Pop Star Of Tamil Cinema

THE VOICE EVERY HERO WANTED

HITTING THE HIGH NOTE

- TMS was conferred the **Padma Shri** (2003), **Kalaimamani** and scores of other titles like **Ezhilisai Mannar**
- TMS began his entry into films **imitating M K Thyagaraja Bhagavathar's voice and style**
- Veteran music composer **G Ramanathan honed TMS as a polished playback singer**
- K V Mahadevan and the Viswanathan-Ramamoorthy duo, as well as M S Viswanathan, **later fashioned their melodies to suit TMS's voice**
- Studio baron AV Meiyappan was TMS's patron and well-wisher, **as was film producer Chinnappa Thevar**
- Many of Kannadasan's magnificent lyrics **were rendered by TMS**
- TMS reckoned P Sushila **was the best suited female voice for duets**
- The prolific lyricist Vali **was egged on by TMS to try his luck in films**

West Circular Road in Mandaveli, Chennai, will be renamed T M Soundararajan Salai



T M Soundararajan
1923-2013

Vamanan

T M Soundararajan believed he would live to see his 100th year, surpass it even. Tragically, he passed away in his 91st year, but he left behind a legacy that continues to captivate audiences. If fate had allowed him to reach his centennial milestone, the commemoration may perhaps have been grander than the current gestures of erecting a life-sized statue of him in Madurai, the city of his birth, and naming a street in Chennai, after him, where he had lived for more than six decades. Nevertheless, people around the world celebrate his enduring legacy, through live programmes featuring his greatest hits.

Even his last journey had been anything but funereal. All through the day of his passing (May 25, 2013) groups had taken turns belting out his popular numbers, and the final procession had at its vanguard, a thrill of fans as choral celebrants of many of his evergreen hits. For TMS, dead or alive, is more than any milestone in music. He is the buzz and electricity of the human voice at its most emphatically melodious.

Without the amazing joie de vivre and vibrancy of his inimitable tone, TMS would surely not have been able to pull it off in the climactic song in the iconic film, Tiruvilaiayaadal (1965), with his 'Paattum naane, bhaavamum naane' ('I am the song, I am the emotion'), having had to compete with such towering singers as the stentorian K B Sundarambal, the high-pitched briga wonder T R Mahalingam, and the talented M Balamuralikrishna.

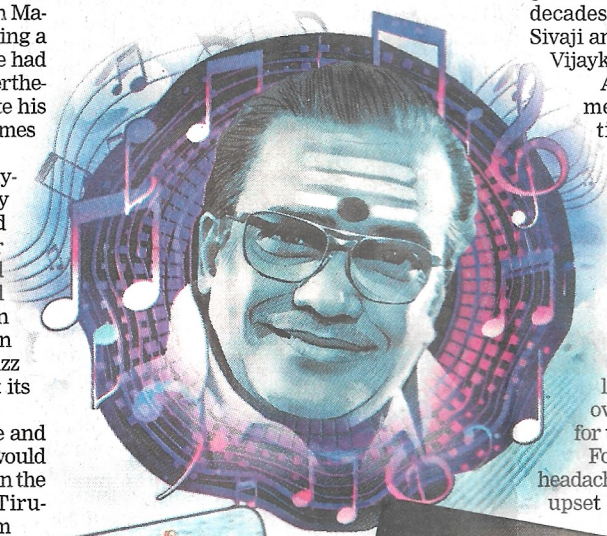
It was his powerful voice which retained its timbre and texture across the octaves, as well as his inimitable Tamil diction and ability to evoke a feeling that made his singing the most predominant feature even when he was accompanied by a nearly 100-piece orchestra, as in 'Enge Nimmadhi'.

In Aayirathil Oruvan (1965), MGR's version of Errol Flynn's Captain Blood, and one of the first of his films to see digitalisation in the new millennium, the musical high point is the anthem-like proclamation of the spirit of freedom in 'Adho andha paravaipola' in TMS's reverberant voice. So gripping did the song prove that the original version was used with minimal additions in the 2010 film of the same name.

TMS had to surmount many barriers and outstrip many competitors to reach the vaunted spot of the most sought-after male voice in Tamil cinema. After his debut, he was restricted to the folk genre and ended up singing for nondescript characters in films. It took him four years to sing for MGR and Sivaji who were turning out to be the two most significant forces in Tamil cinema. Subsequently, TMS tended to be seen as the specialist in Carnatic-oriented songs, preferably of the high-pitched variety, as he was bracketed with the earlier superstar of song, M K Thyagaraja Bhagavathar.

This image was so strong that in 1960, the Viswanathan-Ramamurthy duo could not think of Soundararajan for the Paava Mannippu song, 'Vandha naal mudhal', a melodious number of the protagonist reflecting on the destiny of humanity riven by religious discord.

Illustration: Shinod Akkaraparambil



'Adho andha paravaipola' from the film Aayirathil Oruvan (1965)

TMS is remembered for several songs such as 'Paattum naane, bhaavamum naane' ('I am the song, I am the emotion') from the film Tiruvilaiayaadal (1965)

Tiring at every try, when Viswanathan turned to TMS, the latter said: "It would be easy for me, but I kept my counsel as you were looking elsewhere". That is how TMS graduated into the mode of the golden-voiced pop singer. It is this versatility across genres that kept him going for about four decades as the voice of heroes, from Sivaji and MGR through Jaishankar to Vijaykanth and Satyaraj.

As an outspoken and temperamental personality, TMS sometimes courted controversy. Because of this, MGR took a keen interest in breaking TMS's monopoly by introducing SPB and Yesudas as his playback singers. Nevertheless, till his last film, MGR could not avoid TMS for songs that needed to be forceful. TMS was as much a man of live shows and approached them with gusto. With less work at home, he undertook overseas trips to sing at concerts for the Tamil diaspora.

For a man who once stated that a headache that affected a family member upset him, the untimely passing of three of his children, Balasubramanian (at 15 years, 1966), Chandrika (at 31 in 1980) and Chitralekha (at 52 in 1999) disturbed him deeply, though in different ways. Sometimes his reactions were tempestuous and deeply poignant. Sometimes he felt that as an artist, he should have been free, and not have formed relationships. There was even a time when he tried to end his life. But today, TMS is more likely to live on, a centenary being another opportunity to celebrate his perennial song.

(The writer is a historian of Tamil cinema and the biographer of TMS)

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